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LABOR LAW IMPROVEMENT AND ENFORCEMENT: THE MANUFACTURER'S ATTITUDE ¹

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IN the state of New York there was a time, not so very far distant, when a large proportion of the manufacturers took little or no interest in legislative action affecting labor and never reckoned with their responsibilities under the labor laws until worried into doing so. At that time, particularly in the less populous parts of the state, they were seldom worried and, in spite of the efforts and oft-repeated recommendations of able and zealous commissioners, the provision for state enforcement of the labor laws was so inadequate that manufacturers had difficulty in believing that serious observance had been expected by our lawmakers.

At the present day such matters have greatly changed for the better, and to an extent that is hardly realized by a public fed largely upon sensation and responding chiefly to lamentable industrial catastrophes, the chief lesson of which is that whatever is permitted by law or administration to be anybody's business is, in daily life, nobody's business. At the present time the best type of manufacturer looks his legal obligations to labor squarely in the face and plans accordingly. He realizes his moral as well as his statutory responsibilities toward his employes and in many cases exceeds his statutory liability in satisfying his conscience and intelligence regarding his moral duty.

This good work naturally begins at the top. It still needs a long process of education and demonstration to instil a sense of obligation in the great mass of small employers in our villages and large cities, and to make them realize that the way out is clearly marked.

Towards this end agencies which hardly existed ten years ago

¹ Read in discussion at the joint meeting of the Academy of Political Science and the New York Association for Labor Legislation, November 10, 1911.

are now coöperating with the state. Some of the larger corporations not only are striving to make their factories models of safety and sanitation, but are freely making their experiences available for the common good. The press, both social and technical, is doing a noble service in diffusing information. The capable safety inspectors of our casualty insurance companies are able to concentrate their attention upon accident prevention and are performing splendid missionary work among their policy holders. We can ill afford to exchange this work for anything less efficient, as might well happen should the compensation question finally take any form which weakens the preventive motive. The work of accident-prevention associations is also an increasing factor in education, and the writer is not without hope that soon the education of no young engineer will be considered complete at any of our colleges unless he has been taught the nature of industrial accident risks and methods of avoiding them, a subject now conspicuously absent from engineering courses. The foremen of manufacturing establishments are being taught that safety engineering is a part of the daily routine and that effective supervision and safe working is their share of the work.

Last but not least, the manufacturer hails with satisfaction the placing of the labor commissioner's staff on a practical basis, the addition to it of a trained mechanical engineer and the parceling out of the state into workable divisions under skilled superintendence. This decentralization and specialized knowledge of definite state areas will count for much in both enforcement and observance. One visit a year on an average to any plant by a factory inspector charged with enforcing many statutes is unsatisfactory, and such slight exercise of the policing function alone can do little towards education in accident risk and labor obligations.

For a fraction of the cost of an inspector, an information bureau technically informed could prepare and issue to employers illustrated pamphlets discussing the accident and sanitary risk peculiar to various industries. By laying stress successively on particular danger-points and safeguards it could, the writer believes, accomplish far more than the formal yearly visit

accomplishes, and could greatly improve the efficiency of the latter when it takes place.

The wave of humanitarian interest, which is on the crest at present and which will of course have its variations, is not the only or indeed the chief factor in securing permanent betterment in industrial conditions. A less obvious but none the less real influence is at work which bids fair to make the path smoother for the realization of some labor ideals. The possibilities in improved labor legislation, particularly in hours of labor, are closely allied to and dependent upon improved labor and factory efficiency.

Economic necessity, if not inclination, is already driving the manufacturer to take up in all seriousness the conservation and intensive application of human energies in every department of activity, distributive as well as productive. To succeed in this his factory must be safe, clean, well lighted, heated and ventilated, and his employes must be willing to be taught how to attain higher efficiency in a shorter working day. The living necessities of a rapidly multiplying urban population leave us no longer any choice as to whether we shall or shall not intensify the industrial arts. After a period of great abundance and of great waste of natural resources we are now living upon charity, the charity of the farmer and of every living soul whose efficiency or inefficiency contributes to the cost of necessities. Even the farmer must now rely wholly upon the engineer and manufacturer for the tools of his trade which alone make extensive cultivation possible, and upon the chemist and other scientists for the directions which will enable him to intensify his yield as well. The population question within our own borders will shortly make these steps imperative and no legislation or political economy which ignores such needs can possibly stand a trial.

In spite of some unwise advocacy and also of not a little current misrepresentation of the efficiency movement—which by the way is not the property or patent of any particular set of practitioners—the manufacturer is bound to reckon with it and nothing but good to the body politic can come from wise use of it. Reasonable hours of labor, safety, sanitation and com-

pensation are all involved in the efficiency he seeks, and the steps he has to take to attain these most desirable ends tax his organization, his skill of management and his capital far more than they do his workmen, who are insured increasing leisure and increasing reward for a new type of diligence. If the stereotyped and unprogressive "trades" stand in the way they will most certainly block labor's progressive ideals and in the long run will invite their own destruction.

The progressive manufacturer's organization is deliberately directed towards enabling employe and capitalist alike to make more of the opportunities of the working day under efficient shop conditions which satisfy every reasonable aspiration of labor and which will make it possible to obtain permanently by scientific coöperation a larger measure of leisure for the workman than legal fiat alone could ever secure.

Let the labor laws be framed under competent advice and follow the best practise; let them be always enforced with diligence, ability and tact by inspectors whom manufacturers can respect and who have a profitable, secure and honorable future in the service of the state; let these conditions be mandatory, not permissive, and the factory inspector will become more and more a welcome visitor in our busy hives of industry.